

**THE IMITATOR: A
NOVEL, PP. 12-196**

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PERCIVAL POLLARD

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THE IMITATOR

A NOVEL

Percy W. Pollard



SAINT LOUIS
WILLIAM MARION REEDY
1901

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in; you listen to the most stupid talk with the most graceful air imaginable; that is one of the sure roads to popularity in clubdom. When it is the fashion to be artistic, you can be so as easily as the others; when sport is the watchword your fine physique forbids you no achievement. You play tennis and golf and polo quite well enough to make women split their gloves in applause, and not too well to make men sneer at you for a 'pro.' When you are riding to hounds in Virginia you are never far from the kill, and there is no automobilist whom the Newport villagers are happier to fine for fast driving. You are equally at home in a cotillon and on the deck of a racing yacht. You could marry whenever you liked. Your character is unspotted either by the excessive vice that shocks the mob, or the excessive virtue that tires the smart. You have means, manners and manner. Finally, you have the two cardinal qualities of smartness, levity and tolerance." He paused, and gave a smile of satisfaction. "There, do you like the portrait?"

"It is abominable," said Vane, "it is what I see in my most awful dreams. And the horror of it is that it is so frightfully true. I am merely one of the figures in the elaborate masquerade we call society. I make no progress in life; I learn nothing except new fashions and foibles. I am weary of the masquerade and the masks. Life in the smart world is a game with masks; one shuffles them as one does cards. As for me, I want to throw the whole pack

into the fire. Everyone wears these masks; nobody ever penetrates to the real soul behind the make-up."

"It is a game you play perfectly. One should hesitate long about giving up anything that one has brought to perfection. These others dabble and squabble in what you call the secondary imitations of life; you, at any rate, are giving your imitation at first hand."

"Yes, but it no longer satisfies me. Listen, Luke. You must promise not to laugh and not to frown. It will seem absurd to you; yet I am terribly in earnest about it. When first I came out of college I went in for science. When I gave it up, it was because I found it was leading me away from the human interest. There is the butterfly I want to chase; the human interest. I attempted all the arts; not one of them took me far on my way. My failure, Luke, is an ironic sentence upon the vaunted knowledge of the world."

"Your failure? My dear Orson; come to the point. What do you mean by the human interest?"

"I mean that neither scientist nor scholar has yet shown the way to one man's understanding of another's soul. The surgeon can take a body and dissect its every fraction, arguing and proving each function of it. The painter tries, with feeble success, to reach what he calls the spirit of his subject. So does the author. He tries to put himself into the place of each of his characters; he simms, always, for

the nearest possible approach to the lifelike. And, above all the others, there is the actor. In this, as in its other qualities, the art of acting is the crudest, the most obvious of them all; yet, in certain moments, it comes nearest to the ideal. The actor in his mere self is—well, we all know the story of the famous player being met by this greeting: 'And what art thou to-night?' But he goes behind a door and he can come forth in a series of selves. A trick or so with paint; a change of wig; a twist of the face-muscles, and we have the same man appearing as *Napoleon*, as *Richelieu*, as *Falstaff*. The thing is external, of course. Whether there shall be anything more than the mere bodily mask depends upon the actor's intelligence and his imagination. The supreme artist so succeeds, by virtue of much study, much skill in imitating what he has conceived to be the soul of his subject, in almost giving us a lifelike portrait. And yet, and yet—it is not the real thing; the real soul of his subject is as much a mystery to that actor as it is to you or me. That is what I mean when I say that science fails us at the most important point of all; the soul of my neighbor is as profound a mystery to me as the soul of a man that lived a thousand years ago. I can know your face, Luke, your clothes, your voice, the outward mask you wear; but—can I reach the secrets of your soul? No. And if we cannot know how others feel and think, how can we say we know the world? Bah! The world is a realm of shadows in

which all walk blindly. We touch hands every day, but our souls are hidden in a veil that has not been passed since God made the universe."

"You cry for the moon," said Moncreith. "You long for the unspeakable. Is it not terrible enough to know your neighbor's face, his voice, his coat, without burdening yourself with knowledge of his inner self? It is merely an egoistic curiosity, my dear Orson; you cannot prove that the human interest, as you term it, would benefit by the extension in wisdom you want."

"Oh, you are wrong, you are wrong. The whole world of science undergoes revolution, once you gain the point I speak of. Doctors will have the mind as well as the body to diagnose; lovers will read each others hearts as well as their voices; lies will become impossible, or, at least, futile; oh—it would be a better world altogether. At any rate, until this avenue of knowledge is opened to me, I shall call all the rest a failure. I imitate; you imitate; we imitate; that is the conjugation of life. When I think of the hopelessness of the thing,—do you wonder I grow bitter? I want communion with real beings, and I meet only masks. I tell you, Luke, it is abominable, this wall that stands between each individual and the rest of the world. How can I love my neighbor if I do not understand him? How can I understand him if I cannot think his thoughts, dream his dreams, spell out his soul's secrets?"

Moncreith smiled at his friend, and let his eyes wander a trifle ironically about his figure. "One would not think, to look at you, that you were possessed of a mania, an itch! If you take my advice you will content yourself with living life as you find it. It is really a very decent world. It has good meat and drink in it, and some sweet women, and a strong man or two. Most of us are quite ignorant of the fact that we are merely engaged in incomplete imitations of life, or that there is a Chinese wall between us and the others; the chances are we are all the happier for our innocence. Consider, for instance, that rosy little face behind us—you can see it perfectly in that mirror—can you deny that it looks all happiness and innocence?"

Vane looked, and presently sighed a little. The face of the girl, as he found it in the glass, was the color of roses lying on a pool of clear water. It was one of those faces that one scarce knows whether to think finer in profile or in full view; the features were small, the hair glistened with a tint of that burnish the moon sometimes wears on summer nights, and the figure was a mere fillip to the imagination. A cluster of lilies of the valley lay upon her hair; they seemed like countless little caps pouring frost upon a copper glow. All about her radiated an ineffable gentleness, a tenderness; she made all the other folk about her seem garish and ugly and cruel. One wondered what she did in that gallery.